

WASHINGTON POST
21 February 1987

Hostages to Be Held Until at Least 1989, PLO Official Asserts

Captives Will Not Be Harmed, Aide Says

J By Jonathan C. Randal
Washington Post Foreign Service

TUNIS, Feb. 20—The Palestine Liberation Organization's security and intelligence chief predicted today that American and other western hostages held in Lebanon will not be freed "before 1989, but will neither be harmed nor killed."

Salah Khalaf, often described as PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat's deputy, said almost all of the hostages were held by the radical pro-Iranian Shiite militia called Hezbollah, or "party of God," as "protection" against feared retaliation by the United States, Syria or "any other Arab or non-Arab force."

In an interview with The Washington Post and NBC News, Khalaf, also known as Abu Iyad, a *nom de guerre*, said Hezbollah would not release the hostages before 1989 because by then "they believe they will be so strong that neither the United States nor Syria could eliminate them."

Speaking in a Tunis suburb, the burly Palestinian also noted that President Reagan's second term ends in January 1989 and that the pro-Iranian Hezbollah was mindful of Iran's refusal to release the U.S. Embassy hostages in Tehran until Jimmy Carter had left office in 1981.

Analysts and western diplomats here said they accepted Khalaf's forecast of continued detention for the hostages, including eight Americans, because privately they had made the same gloomy evaluation, albeit for sometimes different reasons.

Moreover, they noted that for years the PLO has passed reliable information on selected aspects of Middle Eastern terrorism to the U.S., French and other western governments.

"We should forget about the hos-

tages for a while," Khalaf said. He said he had informed the French government—and assumed it had told Washington—not to expect the hostages to be freed for several years.

He denounced recent U.S. attempts to win the hostages' release by shipping arms to Iran as a "fatal mistake" that only "encouraged further hostage taking and turns terrorism into a business," since the kidnapers achieved their objectives.

Khalaf also discouraged American military intervention, which he said he feared would result in "killing the hostages," since "it is not known where they are."

Only Iran could persuade Hezbollah to release the westerners held hostage in Lebanon before 1989, he said, "but Iran is convinced that the western hostages are a form of protection."

He said he was convinced that only Hezbollah—and by extension, Iran—were behind the spate of kidnappings and had invented names such as Islamic Jihad, Revolutionary Justice Organization and Islamic Jihad for the Liberation of Palestine to disguise their own involvement.

Khalaf criticized the latter name as "harmful to the PLO because we have taken a clear position against hostage taking or any form of foreign terrorism," an apparent reference to acts of violence against non-Israeli targets.

"We are against terrorism and are ready to cooperate with any interested party," Khalaf said, "because that terrorism harms our reputation by encouraging those trying to link terrorism with the Palestinian cause."

Khalaf suggested that Hezbollah is so entrenched in Lebanon that Syrian efforts to uproot the extremists would mean striking blindly at—and alienating—all Lebanese Shiites, notably Hezbollah's more moderate pro-Syrian rivals, the Amal militia.

"The situation is out of hand for Syria," he said.

Moreover, he noted, any Syrian move against Hezbollah would "mean the end of Damascus' re-

lations with Iran," which Syrian President Hafez Assad "neither wanted nor could afford" at this point.

Khalaf was careful to differentiate the PLO from Hezbollah despite their present tactical alliance against Syria and Amal, which is besieging Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon.

He denied that the PLO maintained organizational links or was on good terms with Hezbollah.

But "we have personal sources," he said, and are in "constant contact with good friends" inside the militia.

"We have no power over Hezbollah to oblige them to release the hostages," he said.

But he added that the PLO had tried to convince its friends in the militia that hostage taking was "detrimental to the Arabs and to Islamic thought."

He said he was convinced that all of the hostages were alive, "and take it from me, not one will be killed, because the life of Hezbollah is linked to the lives of the hostages."

Asked to describe his frequent meetings with European officials, especially to discuss security issues, he said security questions were reviewed but were not the "essential part" of his political activities.

"But if we talk about security we talk in total frankness and with one principle in mind: I do not answer some questions I do not want to answer, but if I answer a question I tell the truth," he said.

As for Terry Waite, the Church of England envoy missing in Lebanon, Khalaf said that Hezbollah was holding him and "try to obtain a confession about his role with American intelligence."